THE WAR, MADAME...

By

Paul Géraldy

75
net
xx
3/17

The War, Madame . . .

The War, Madame . . .

By

Paul Géraldy

Translated by

Barton Blake

New York
Charles Scribner's Sons
1917

COPYRIGHT, 1917, BY
CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

Published March, 1917

THE WAR, MADAME . . .

THE WAR, MADAME . . .

RAMBOUILLET, Maintenon, Saint-Cyr! I fidget in my seat. In an hour we shall be in Paris, that I never expected to see again before the war's end; Paris, whose name gives me a fever now that I am drawing near!

Sent back from the front five weeks ago, and out of hospital for barely one, I might have stayed on in barracks for some time. The garrison town wasn't such a bore after all. I had a friend there, also books. My family came to see me. And I made a bit of a face when the captain told me yesterday:

"Vernier, you are leaving us to-morrow morning. The chief is making out an order for your transportation."

Instantly I thought of the names of the other corporals whose turn it was to

go. And I protested timidly. My big captain, good fellow that he is, answered:

"As you like. But, you see, I'm leaving myself three days from now. I should have enjoyed seeing you out there. Besides, they are asking me for two men to convoy the parcel-post. I thought it would mean a good chance of your getting back to the front and I was giving you Bossard for company. If you managed well, you could spend over half a day in Paris and pick up Bossard at Bourget."

"But, captain, all my family are in Sologne. So Paris, at this time. . . ."

And it is true that I had long ago persuaded myself, thanks to saying it over and over again, that Paris tempted me not at all. To see again the places of which I had such happy memories of life, love, and ambition—to see them

silent, straitened, empty, sad; to find my room locked and shuttered, all camphor and rolled-up carpets—no, I could do without all that.

But the instant a possibility of returning presented itself my pulses tingled. And when my captain said, "Have your way! You can wait for the detachment," I very nearly yelled:

"No, no, no! Don't change anything, captain! It's all right—I'm going!"

Crazy with joy, I raced up two flights of stairs, crossed the bedroom in one bound, dropped my outfit on the bed, and woke up Jontin with the cry:

"Brute! Idiot! I'm going to Paris!"

So now, behind my open newspaper, I tremble with impatience under the outward calm which I have put on as a mask, a mask that burns my face. *Four-hundred-and-twentieth day of the war,*

announces the provincial newspaper which, to cheat my impatience, I study so religiously in my corner of the day coach. How tiresome these papers are! The war's development stretches over too much space for any one event to declare itself in its true meaning, and over too much time for the progress of a single day to have any perceptible value. But we are running into Versailles. Half an hour from now, and——

The even-tempered autumn country-side passes by my car-windows. The telegraph wires waltz to the rude rhythm of their poles. My railway-wagon stinks of stale cigars, and I am happy as a boy. A second-class compartment is, for a corporal like me, a haven indeed. I can cast on my neighbors a frowning look, such as straightway paralyzes any notion they may have had of engaging me in talk; I can cross my legs, can read

at ease, and can follow the ploughed ground with the eyes of a man who loves it well but keeps his distance. . . . I am most irregularly provided with a pass signed by my captain, good for twenty-four hours' liberty, and I have left to the good Bossard (who is not a Parisian) the job of convoying all by himself baggage-car Px50712—which he will attend to perfectly well. He ought to come back slowly with a load of merchandise, and I will catch up with him this evening. Like a blind zig-zagging insect that the wind has been blowing hither and yon for the last year, I mean to spend the whole afternoon wandering at will through certain streets, passing before windows that are, in memory, very beautiful to me; spots of gold that, from the pavements of wide modern avenues, one sees from under plane-trees. I know well enough what

awaits me. Many a curtain will be drawn before the windows I have loved. I shall find it a mournful Paris. But I am going to enter the city as one enters the room of a very beautiful woman who has been very ill.

How gray Paris is! This Gare Montparnasse, a sombre background at parting, is positively doleful when one arrives. I have scarcely touched the platform but I recall the staircase, of a piece with the pavement, the exit into a crowd, the triangular *Place*, and this rue de Rennes, stiff and stupid, which separates two charming quarters and makes one think of neither. I make my mind up to pass quickly and unseeing through all this drabness. But a policeman bars the way and points to a group of permissionnaires who, like me, are just off the train.

"Not so fast, soldier!"

And we are all taken toward an officer who will *visé* our passes. Is anything going to happen to me? No, everything turns out all right. I am free.

Yet this freedom of mine is not liberty. I was a soldier without thinking about it. Now that for a few hours I cease to be a soldier, I remember that I am one. So I descend the stairs very slowly, very cautiously.

And here are the remembered houses and the dun sidewalks. Each of the few cabs and taxis is disputed by half a dozen clients, and I don't want to be disappointed. . . . The subway, there, reaches out to me the invitation of its stony staircase. And I plunge into the train which will take me, without letting me see anything, out of a quarter that bores me.

I wind my way through all these peo-

ple without trouble or astonishment. Often I said to myself at the front: "When I return I shall be stupid." It seems to me that I am quite the contrary—more live, fresher, more supple, with more stored-up energies. It costs no effort to adjust myself; I am less bewildered in Paris, at the end of a full year's absence, than I was one day, after two and a half months of war, in the Baths of Mourmelon. There, when I had closed my bathroom door, the sensation of being all alone suddenly seemed to me so new and so delicious that it went to my head. I stripped off my clothes as one lays down a burden. Stark naked, I took dance steps and, when I caught my own reflection in the glass, I said to myself, amazed: "It's me!"

But in Paris I am not bewildered. I took this subway yesterday. I knew

this smell in advance, and these lights, and these people worming their way in and out, and the hateful clangor of the side doors. I had forgotten nothing—nothing, that is, but the charm of the women. Lord, but the women are pretty! This one, and that one, and that one—three of them already in this one car! I had forgotten that so much art could be put into a cloak, so much wit into a hat.

On the day of mobilization I was walking with a friend. We came face to face with a decidedly pretty woman. In the look that she threw our way, there was the timid offer and the resigned sorrow of those whose fortunes crumble to dust, the sense of a disgrace which every instant brings nearer. And it contrasted painfully, this pitiful look of a cast-off animal, with the showy, provocative luxury of

her dress. I turned toward my friend and read my own thought in his eyes: "Women have lost a lot of their importance!" I return—and they have regained that importance of theirs.

Near me a talkative old gentleman is speaking:

"Now that Paris is dark at night, you must go to see Notre-Dame by moonlight. You will see it as you have never seen it before and as you will never see it again."

Fine people, fine hearts, fine souls! Dear city where the chance passer-by thinks thoughts like these!

All the same, this subway bores me. I am wasting minutes that are too precious. Besides, too many people are staring. It makes me self-conscious; my helmet grows heavy and heavier. But I escape, and emerge above ground near old Saint-Germain-des-Prés.

I have this afternoon to myself, and even a bit of the evening. Shall I plan how to spend that time? All my family are in Sologne, and I certainly am not going to inhale the camphor and dust of their city apartment. As to my own apartment, I decided long ago to stay away from it at whatever effort. Better avoid sentimentalizing; besides, would it be so sentimental? Might it not be sickening, rather? When I think of that sophisticated nest of mine it seems to me I feel a vague uneasiness. I must have changed in a year's time, for the thought of finding again, in my furniture and on my walls, the soul that I once took such pains to express there, bores me beyond all words. Since then I have exteriorized a Maurice Vernier much wiser than the old one, and knowing in other matters than the choice of hangings and the placing of knick-

knacks. Furthermore, I can see all my possessions again with a far-away definiteness, as if I were looking at them through the small end of my opera-glasses. Distance has diminished everything without eliminating the slightest detail. I see my mottled cushions and that furniture of sickly ebony that I was once so proud of. No, I really haven't any wish to parade all by myself through those compartments whence I made last year so ridiculous a departure, with my hair clipped close, my feet shod in enormous laced boots, immense goggles straddling my nose, and a gold-rimmed eye-glass slipped in my pocket "for town wear."

As for the men I know, the ones who are still alive are scattered. And it seems to me that if I go and look up my other friends they will only be farther away than ever. Never mind, I

will just sample the city at random. If chance makes me pass before a friendly door, well, I can decide the next step then. I don't want to arrange anything in advance. If obscure motives direct the steps I take, may they remain unknown to me and may I, up to the last possible minute, rest in ignorance of my preferences.

All except my first hour. I know perfectly well that I want to lunch, and to lunch as well as I can in some restaurant that I like. I shall find it somewhere near the Madeleine, and I'm going there on foot. Let me be off.

Paris, that I had been told was so lugubrious, is scarcely sad even. Above all, it is charming. Cleared of its excessive turbulence of vehicles, it adds to the splendor of being Paris a kind of provincial gravity which becomes it better than it does the Province. Every-

thing here is calm, and without sound. Paris has no longer its air of giving strangers an exhausting fête, but rather that of collecting itself, of refashioning its own interior life. The rue Mazarine, quite empty and glistening between long black walls, is dominated, at one end, by the dome of the Institute; it has the air of some street in Venice. The Seine, which I love none too well because it too perfectly dramatizes the Paris of my first youth—idleness, fine arts, Latin Quarter—the Seine, threadbare as the classics, gives me an unanticipated thrill. Good morning, old pal! Here I am back. . . . I halt in the courtyard of the Louvre. Heavens, there's no mistake about it being good to look at! What order, what concert, what rhythm! I am flooded in the harmony of it. I bathe myself, piously, in this silent music. Comical, this be-

ginning all over thoughts which, through my new eyes, awaken to new life. Am I going to discover the old Paris? I break away and reach the street again. Here it is. But there is no disenchantment. These passers-by must have been picked for me. All these men have the air of thinking. All these women have eyes that one loves.

How perfect they are! Debonair and distant in all their furs, they make you forget the flesh of them. Women you meet elsewhere shame you when they agitate your senses. But the sensuality these women excite is purely cerebral; a subtle play of spiritualized desires. A kind of aristocracy subtilizes their sex, adds to the mystery of it. One is a sixteen-year-old in their company. Little princesses, I adore you.

And now I blush for my trench clothes that I have been airing so

boldly; blush for the living war-story that I am. In the first days of Louis XIV's *immortal campaign of Alsace* (as the histories call it) Madame de Sévigné said:

"Nowadays it is the latest fashion to be wounded."

But this time it has been the style for over a year and my war-cross has missed the cue. I must seem to be something of a farmer, so far behind the times!

The well-known restaurant that I enter will be closed to me at two o'clock. I am informed of this in the tone courtiers use when they tell the sons of kings not to stick their fingers in their noses. I shall have to lunch in something of a hurry. People are looking my way. I busy myself in taking off my helmet with a natural air, and give the lunch-card such attention as seems to detach itself grudg-

ingly from far loftier preoccupations, while handing the helmet to a 'bus boy. And yet I supposed I had become, once more, an unaffected sort of person!

I dare to risk a glance about me when I have laid on my plate the empty shell of my twelfth oyster. Bless me! the people all about are lunching two by two without worrying one bit about me and my oysters. To the assurance which I regain, there would be joined a shade of bitterness if plenty of officers, of a most fetching elegance, were not sitting at the other tables. A young colonel, near by, wears a marvel of a uniform. In the little town I left only this morning such an encounter would have phased me no end. Not here; between this swagger colonel and the bumpish corporal that I am, all distance is obliterated. There reigns, in this place of refuge, a delicious equality.

Our eyes meet. Blithely I give him the military salute, and he returns it with a grace in which I read a knowing respect for the number of my regiment and my humble woollen stripes. I might even ask him for a light had I need of one.

They serve me rapidly and well, and with excellent dishes. I enjoy the food, but its quality nowise astonishes me. Maybe my notion of lunching alone like this is stupid, but I'm satisfied with the way it's working out, and have earned this happy hour. Droll that I should be here, I who to-morrow will be out there again. . . . And you might bring me a Henry Clay, waiter!

I pass out of the restaurant quite at peace with all the world, and nothing to ask for but some one to talk to. The air of the street is mild, and soft-tired vehicles polish the asphalt. This is the

Paris that I knew when, from my bed, and still drowsy, I listened to the diminuendo of rhythmic hoof-beats, or the purring flight of a smooth-running auto. The rarefied sounds and cotton-wool air of this afternoon give one a sense of morning languor. Ah! those windows!

Have I not disobeyed myself? Do I truly owe it to chance that I am here? The four windows I am looking at, those windows on the third floor of the modern apartment-house in this rue Tronchet that I like because it is so convenient and yet so retired, were once the centre of all my thoughts and interests. I pause, head high, and murmur to myself: "My youth!"

My youth! On reflection, this theme does not deserve the 'cello concert I was on the point of playing on the strings of memory. I seem to hear

Alfred snort these two words—hand on heart—to mock at my romanticism.

Alfred, working man of Paris, is my sole confidant at the front. He has taught me how to be simple, and to distrust words that are vague. These long months of war have, thanks to him, stocked me with a brand-new mind where my thoughts play at ease, free of all rubber-stamps and ready-made phrases. Alas! in this new brain of mine Truth makes a first appearance.

Alfred has a great deal of shame in respect to his sentiments but no shame at all of the flesh. Thus he is the antithesis to my old friends. If, to tell him the story of which these windows were once witnesses, I imitated this delicacy of his, I should have nothing left to tell him. . . . Alfred, you see me; you are my judge. You are right.

This adventure was the saddest you can imagine. I played a poor-spirited part in it, and one that lacked realism. And yet I want to go up-stairs, Alfred, to see the young woman who lives there. I want—just for one moment—to enjoy the cosey warmth of a fine apartment, and this one is so charming! You can hardly realize how much I used to care for these things. Come, I'm going up. Perhaps she won't be home anyway.

She is at home. After going through all the needful motions, motions into which my body still falls mechanically, after the buttons have been pushed and the doors opened, here I am in her presence. She is wearing a divine gown, circumspect and audacious all at once; a gown in which her taste and the mode are allies.

"You seem to have put on weight,"

she says. "And you have the war-cross. That's splendid, you know. *C'est très chic, mon ami!*"

There used to be some jolly canvases of Vuillard's and some fine spring pieces by Boggio in this room. In their place, in each of the empty frames, I spy only the picture-wire.

"But, Fabienne," I say in my surprise, "how long have you been collecting picture-frames?"

"My dear, all my pictures are at Bordeaux. I followed the government there during the exile—like everybody else—and I had the pictures rolled, with the paint side out, according to the advice they gave me, and took them with me in the motor. When we all returned things still looked a bit thick, so I took the precaution of leaving the pictures in storage at Bordeaux."

"A needless precaution, Fabienne.

But what next? It's positively cold in your apartment!"

"Don't speak of it, my friend. The heater is broken, and it's a German one. I've had to send for a new fixture all the way to Berlin."

I start as I echo:

"To *Berlin*, Fabienne!"

"Why, yes, my dear," says she; "that is, by way of Basle. But, of course, all this takes centuries."

And she adds as our conversation dies away:

"You know, my friend, that I am ill, very ill!"

Under the thin skin her blood races—pure and facile. There is no mistake about the youthfulness of that flesh; the clearness of those eyes, the supple and perfect play of the body. And yet my eyes very politely cloud at her words.

"Yes," she pursues, "I have cerebral

anæmia. It is this war, and changed habits—my car requisitioned and all! I, who never took a step!"

I murmur, without irony, the name of a specialist.

"My dear, I've consulted every one who is still here. Nowadays, if you stop to think, I've plenty of time. It seems that it is a really serious case. But they can't take care of me till after the war. They all agree on that."

By a very deep inclination of my head I try to denote compassion for so many sufferings. And now she speaks the requisite words of interest as to my thirteen months of service, and so precisely the right ones that they are most convincing. For every one of my stories she has a parallel, and every experience I narrate to her suggests a new resemblance with some one of her friends, so that my pride grows weary. . . .

"But, Fabienne, tell me about yourself, talk to me about Paris. What are you all doing?"

"Well," she sighs, "it is stupid here, my poor friend, as you probably realize. The newspapers are frightful. One reads about deaths day after day. They are sending the actors, even, to the trenches! They say young Vernet got killed very smartly indeed. Of course, you know that Durieux is all shot to pieces? He told me all about his sufferings; that man is a martyr! These things don't exactly cheer one up, you know. And, of course, you can't go out at all. The most that ever happens is a dinner sometimes, just between friends, in morning frocks. For that matter, nobody could dress up if they wanted to. The cutters have been mobilized. You ought to see the waist and hips they give me nowadays! At

the theatre, it is revivals—old stuff that one can't get much excited about. And it is so dark at night! The chauffeurs run into the curb. You hear of nothing but accidents. It's safer to wait till the war is over. All the same, I went to hear Chénal. She is still singing the *Marseillaise*, and it's a furor! You must confess that she's perfect in it. I'd like to hear Delna try it. Chénal puts all the poetry into it; Delna would be more brutal, more realistic—possibly truer. If you're interested, I'll write to tell you which one I prefer, after I've heard Delna. Then there are the knitting-teas. Generally they are from five to seven, and we all work for you soldiers. And, of course, we have our godsons. Naturally, I'm godmother for some one. I'd like to have had an airman, but all the women want airmen. It was a telephone-operator that

I drew, as a matter of fact. But when will it all be over? Have you seen my picture in my nurse's uniform?"

While she talks on I am thinking: "Little one, I should like to answer you in the language of Alfred. Is it conceivable that, transposed by your poor little brain, the huge upheaval which is shaking this old world of ours can be reduced to such silly twaddle? Naturally you are not an intellectual, but you aren't a silly, either, and you understand whatever is explained to you. . . . I have even succeeded in making you wince a bit, in times gone by, by means of words that were rather subtle. You are a woman, and so, I will concede, the things that are going on are beyond your understanding. But your remaining exactly the same through it all—really, it turns my stomach! I have just come back to Paris. I didn't want

to see all its limitations the very first minute. And you've brought them all to life! Apparently you don't realize what a hell there is an hour's motor ride from here, in places we've visited together, and where I've just come from, and am going to return to. Men, my dear, are made like this: they die, but they want your admiration; they suffer, but want your pity. It is our solace, out there, to think that behind us Paris holds its breath, and waits. . . . Moreover, we often tell ourselves that if we have not yet been loved as well as we could have wished, it is because we haven't, so far anyway, done anything extraordinary. But it seems to us as if now, raised so high above what we used to be, we must be surprising you a little! Oh, we aren't proud out there; there are too many of us doing the same things for that! All the same, I've said to myself three or

four times already: 'What if my girls could see me now!' Ah, little one, assisting at this great drama as if it were being played for you in some foreign tongue, and conscious only of the length and boredom of it, I am tempted to translate it for you! I have in my head some pictures of it that would make you faint, some recollections that would craze you! I have seen the torn bodies of my comrades smoking in the air at my side. I have charged, death in my mouth, with this one thought: Something has got to break, either them or me, their mass or my flesh! On, then! In God's name, blast their eyes and at them! Stick their bellies and smash their jaws! I'd like to tell you about all that—in your little salon."

Instead, I rise and smile foolishly:

"Good-by, Fabienne, *à bientôt.*"

She, too, rises, politely protesting:

"What? So soon? Oh—you're dining out."

I allege the great number of errands I have to attend to.

"Well, then, you'll come back," she insists. "You told me you'd come to Paris all by yourself."

This time I say "No" pointblank. She looks at me a little surprised and, pouting, adds:

"Oh, well! . . . But, do you know, you haven't changed much. . . ."

And here I am in the street again, where pass, in the long, undyed cloaks that are the fashion nowadays, Fabiennes whom I do not know. What are they thinking about? Have they husbands or brothers at the front? Are they on the way to meet somebody? No one can say, now or ever; for theirs are the

grave and wheedling eyes of the happy wife or fashionable mistress, and that busy air of theirs makes them twice as mysterious as they would be without it. Have they men to love them—and what men? The street is full of men! Why are there so many? This one who is walking at my side is of my age, but he is not a soldier. His civilian clothes ought to make him itch, all the same! I want him to see my war-cross. And the fellow by the kiosk, who spends so much time reading the theatre-bills! For that matter, all the theatres are open. They are playing reviews. And people go. What frame of mind reigns here, then? Why were there so many people at my restaurant just now? They were gay at some of the tables. Some of them even laughed very noisily. What are all these people thinking about? Apparently they have adjusted

themselves to the war; they have made a habit of it. . . .

In the little town I have come from the comic films drew enormous crowds to the moving pictures. And in the evening, at the Alcazar, we applauded singers made up like women, their lapels ornamented with camellias as big as a cabbage. They sang patriotic ballads and camp-songs. And the civilians one saw here and there were extremely quiet. I laughed at all these jumping-jacks, even at the fat man all in azure who, lately nominated as an officer of the quartermaster's staff with some kind of job in connection with uniforming the troops, told me very ingenuously: "Now I can ask to go to the front without the least risk, and that will be very useful to me. I publish a Republican newspaper. We mustn't forget the elections. And if I drew a

little shell-wound in the buttocks, where it wouldn't disfigure me, why, that would positively give me a halo." Yes, out there, poor souls like that made me laugh with all my heart. But that folks should be unchanged here at Paris, that breaks my heart! I don't want it to be like this. It was Paris I thought of when my weariness was too much or when death was too close. Paris! the word electrified me. And Paris, the while, had kept her harlot's heart! Perhaps we are only ridiculous after all, mud-caked, lousy, bearded, beguiled, with the spectre of this second winter campaign before us, the campaign we were sure, last year, we were incapable of repeating—"You can't stand this racket twice"—and for which we are setting out again, docile, resigned, candid. Who is fooling us? Whose dupes are we? Ah, I feel myself a coward.

It is cold. The Germans are stronger than we. I ought to have died at Virton.

Two young women in the deep mourning of widows are face to face with me. They are talking very loud and their dull black shows off their faces of enamel and milk. I see, under their floating veils, the powdered cheeks, the made-up eyelashes, the too vivid red of their lips. . . .

We are a weary nation that was capable, when put to the test, of buoyancy, of a burst of vigor. But after twelve months of it we fall back again. We can't hold the pose for a year. People have become again what they were before. And many of them grow fat on this war! Truly, our age is without beauty. The breath of the passing tempest has but revealed the real motives which move us, shown up the in-

anity of marriage and of love, and made both life and death uglier than before.

And I, I am going back to it. And no end in sight! Are the English doing their part? . . . I am afraid. Too often have I passed untouched through the hail of bullets, too many times the *marmites* have killed my neighbors only. I am Fate's debtor, and Fate will not forget me always. I know it, I feel it: I shall be killed! And the crowds will go on walking past these shop-windows.

Three o'clock. I still have five hours to myself. What am I going to do with them? I can't stay by myself all those five hours!

I move slowly (for I am not sure that I like the idea) toward the house in the rue de Rome where my old friend Madame Baumer lives. This part of town disgusts me. How can any one settle down close to a railroad-station?

Who wants to live in a vestibule? These up-hill streets are tiresome!

Madame must be at home, the concierge (who recognizes me) agrees. Miss Suzanne is at her hospital, that she visits every day. There is good news from Mr. Jean. I go up.

Madame Baumer is fond of me as her son's oldest friend and the friend who talks about him the best. She adores Jean, but her lively sensibility permits her to read too clearly in him certain manly reactions which shock her feminine nature. Hence occasional spats. I, who am not her child, conceal from her better than he the things it is well for a man to hide, and, very close to her and very close to him, I am an easy bond of union. And we are great friends. Come! we will talk about Jean.

The door-bell emits so resonant a

ring in this close air that it vibrates unendingly, as if the sound of it couldn't escape. . . . I wait. They always did have a horrid habit of being slow to answer the bell here. Will they keep me waiting in the parlor, too? The silence sings around me. At last Madame Baumer enters. She has aged.

"Good day, madame."

Naturally I, who have come to see her, who have been waiting for her at this door, have spoken this good day quite as a matter of course. She, on the other hand, shows in her reply how upset she is.

"You!" she exclaims. "It is you, Maurice!"

She stretches out two nervous hands. And here we are, face to face, both silent, till we can get into tune with one another: she, disconcerted by my calm and surprised that, after such great

happenings, I am here, just the same as ever; I, embarrassed at having put her out. And, as we know very well that we are going first of all to say to one another the banal phrases necessary for picking up the thread of things, we wilfully prolong this silence which is friendly to the emotion our words will destroy. Finally, smiling, I murmur:

"Yes, here we are again. How are you?"

"How do you come to be here?" she inquires. "Is it for long? Where do you come from?"

On my part I, too, recite the indispensable string of questions:

"How is Jean? What is Suzanne doing?"

And now we who were mute talk both at once of a thousand subjects that crowd one another, trip one another up, and submerge us. All that we had to

tell one another that was so important, so grave, is now between the two of us like a parcel of tangled silk threads where all shades are jumbled together, the precious ones with the rest, till it is nothing but a disorder that is many-colored yet flat, with no one color standing out above the rest. Stories that we have never told any one precipitate themselves toward the life of speech with an ardor so fiery that they knock each other down, dent each other, and are totally lost, and often they receive, from these first shocks, scars that eternally disfigure them.

This tale of my long campaign, that I have just spoiled so in the telling, can I ever make it live again in its boyish vigor, its awkward and unsophisticated sincerity? How many bungled verities! I have nothing more to say now, and I shuffle my heavy, hobnailed boots on

the carpet, in something like bad humor.

I accept the suggestion of tea that Madame Baumer lightly offers, just as if afternoon tea were still a natural act for me. I haven't any appetite or desire for it, but am happy to have the diversion. The chambermaid, whose name comes back to me the minute I see her, rolls in the tea-wagon, already spread. I salute there, as old friends, the toasted biscuit of yore, a brand to which this household has been faithful for a lifetime. I recognize also this chocolate-pot that, you remember, I used to think was ugly, madame, and that I still do think ugly. How like old times everything is! Present and past are united as easily by this terrible year as our hands above this plate.

My attention, lost for an instant in the motionless folds of the big por-

tières, returns to Madame Baumer. Her eyes shine, as if with moisture. What is wrong? She turns her head and opens her eyelids wide to give two pearls of water which well from the shelter of her eyelashes a chance to be absorbed again. But the pearls are inflating very fast and, already too heavy, start rolling down those pale, worn cheeks. And Madame Baumer is looking at me.

"You see, Maurice," says she, "we have our afternoon tea. It is served like this every day. I live in cotton-wool while you all are out there! What would I have thought, a year ago, if some one had told me that I could eat, sleep, gossip, and look to a thousand domestic trifles, letting myself be distracted and forget, while Jean was in danger, and while I knew it! We talk, and eat cake, and perhaps at this very

instant. . . . And I can live like this! *Live!* Oh, sometimes it is too much for me! I should like——"

"Madame!"

Her tears are flowing faster. And it makes me positively happy to feel for the first time that at Paris, too, there is a war.

She has straightened her thin shoulders and commences again:

"Yes, it is too much for me sometimes, and drives me frantic. If you knew how frightful it is, all this routine of a house that runs on just exactly the same! I have nightmares occasionally. I see cavalry charging. . . . And when I awake there is the bath waiting, and breakfast, and my dresses, and the letters that people write who are tired of hoping and calculating and predicting and have gone back to talking about themselves. Where is Jean all this

time? What is he doing? And you who are here to-day, where will you be to-morrow, Maurice?"

I cover up a happy smile.

"Madame, these are romantics. The cakes, the hot tea—and the horrors of war! Look at me. What would Jean think if he could hear you? Why, Lieutenant Baumer, madame, is at this moment enjoying his tea, too, in his *Cañha*, and very comfortably, and drinking two cups to our one. As he has a first-class pastry-cook as orderly, his cakes are first cousins to yours. That for your antithesis! Come! Come! Trust him a little! Listen, I'm going to explain it all to you. I shut my eyes. I can see him. To-day, precisely, he is in the first-line trenches. Don't put on that tragic look! He is sitting, without a care, in the shelter that he has as section chief, under his roof of sticks

and dirt. He is dressed like a private in a moon-blue, hooded cloak and that admirable modern helmet which comes down to us, all the same, from such far-away traditions—that light Burgundian casque, so strong and quasi-religious, which gives our men out there, when there is a group of them, the look of a celestial army; strange head-gear, I agree, for the head of a puny Parisian, but splendid when our soldiers wear it, and marvellously symbolic of our rustic but gentle France with her peasant strength. It is by this casque and this blue that they will enter into their legend. . . . Your Jean looks well in his helmet and horizon-blue. To a button of his cloak he has hung his gas-mask, in a cloth bag. From time to time he draws his revolver and amuses himself by aiming at a rat. On the table his orderly, Poil, has set the tea

and butter biscuit. He munches one, while, lying on the bed with its iron springs and straw mattress, Tissot, his inseparable friend that he has no doubt told you about—twenty years old, and an under-lieutenant because he is a Superior Normal School man—reads to him from one of the books of poetry his canteen is always full of. Outside, naturally, a cyclone of 77-centimetre shells. . . . But why do you object to that cyclone of 77's? Jean is there expressly to observe the effects of them. Two French monoplanes escape from a swarm of little white puffs. . . . *Elvire, aux yeux baissés*, reads Tissot in his girl voice, and Jean, who adores these verses and listens to them rapturously, says softly, 'Tissot, how you do cackle!' just to hide his pleasure.

"No doubt I shall see Jean. His regiment and mine are in the same bri-

gade, and, though there have been some famous shifts in our sector these days, I count on not being far from him. Do you want me to tell him that you cried? Come, don't listen to that imagination of yours. It's a chatterbox, and it fibs to you. Jean is in high spirits when he is at the front—fighting always gives one high spirits; in the first place, it is action, and then there are a lot of you. Why, it is in the toughest moments that you feel the craziest gayety! When the campaign had just begun I was awfully scared. I can still see myself lying in a beet-field, in the sun, wearing the old red breeches, that seem now to date from another age. Little stifled rustlings, that sounded as if they might be field-mice and things hurrying down into their holes in the ground, punctured the ground at my side, behind me, far, near, everywhere. And the sweat

streamed from my body, from my face, from my eyes—watering the whole field. I was waiting for the bullet that would come and find lodgment in the ground, after passing through my skull or my back. My imagination traced in advance the lightning route of its passage. Oh, I was very badly informed. I lacked practice so! But somebody was creeping up to me—close. I recognized the tall lieutenant whom I liked because he was so graceful. He called me, at the top of his lungs on account of the hubbub: 'Vernier!'—He actually knew my name!—'My lieutenant?'—'Here, my wallet—it's in the left pocket of my jacket.'—'Yes, my lieutenant. And mine is in the left pocket of my capote.'—'I see. Look sharp; we're going to make a push.' The soil was chipped off by a shell at our very sides. '*Piji . . . piji . . . piji. . . !*'

chuckled the swarming rifle-balls. But too late; the lieutenant and I had come to an understanding! Ah, but wasn't I happy all of a sudden! Happy doesn't half express it. All my blood was dancing a fandango of joy through my veins. You see, I had found a pal, a fellow of my own sort, who would understand. What did anything else matter? The sun blinded our eyes with its midsummer glare. Puffs of blackish smoke burst without darkening an azure sky like the skies in fairyland. On the left, a château was burning on its hilltop—burning methodically, like the good castle it was. The rabbits were beating it from the invasion of their fields. The row the batteries made was so tremendous that it became really ridiculous. What in the name of common sense would it have mattered if Vernier, Maurice, had died there?

"And I leaped forward. Whilst I was running, drunk with faintness and delight, I began singing at the top of my voice that motif of 'Schéhérazade' that has run in our heads ever since the last Ballet Russe, exaggerating still further the furious, wild air of it: '*Si do ré, do ré! fa mi ré, do ré! . . . do si do ré do.*' At the climax of it, when there came a shell, sliding on I know not what aerial rails, and wrecked the atmosphere above me, I paused a few seconds, nose deep in my beet-roots, shrivelled myself up as small as possible under my knapsack, and waited for the explosion to bring death or relief. Then, when it was all over, I picked up my tune again, tipsy with joy: '*La sol la do si, la si sol!*' I was never in such high spirits in all my life."

Madame Baumer shook her head.

"You are a kind friend. But I knew that already. One only has to read your

letters to know you all, children that you are. No doubt, your hearts are the salt of the earth, and you live gayly in the face of death, without a care. But death is there all the same, and at the very minute I am talking to you is robbing me of my child, perhaps. Oh, if you only knew the anguish I suffer a hundred times a day, and how it wakes me up at night, stone-cold; if you knew how it makes me shiver when the bell rings, or the postman comes, and I think: 'This time it will be bad news!' For that's the way it would happen; some one would ring the door-bell and Lucie would come with a letter, or to say there was a caller——"

But I break in upon her voice, half-drowned in tears:

"What a neurasthenic you're becoming! We don't think so much as all that, we others! Action purges us of all

those toxic poisons that come from reflecting too much. Why do you believe in the probability of an outcome that no one of us believes is possible even? We, why, we are too proud to think that we can be wounded. You would do well to cultivate this same pride, that gets the better of bad luck. Take my word for it, we take all the proper precautions, but it is from superstition and an instinctive need of obeying the rules of the game rather than from fear of any accident. When some comrade falls near me I know, I am positively certain, that if I had been in his place no such thing would have happened to me. Don't you see? Each of us has absolute confidence in the powers which will that he shall live. The big shells are meant for other folks. One says to himself: 'I! I whom they are expecting at home; I who am here with this

hand of mine; I who march in the middle of so many men without ever getting myself mixed up with them; I whose coat just like the other coats remains all the same *my* coat; I who feel everything, who see everything, who, when we are hungry, am hungrier than the rest, and when we are thirsty, am thirstier; I who suffer more and enjoy things more; I who have only to shut my eyes to stop the life of the whole world; I who am perhaps the cause of this war (for isn't it to punish me for having shirked my second year's military service that Fate has wanted to make me a soldier again?); I, finally, Vernier, I, Maurice, raison d'être of the universe—how could it come about that *I* should die? If the others are killed, that is to even things up with my good luck!—And that is what every one of us thinks. It is so strong, one's

sureness of surviving, that you can't help jollying him a little, this Death who won't get you, who is afraid of you. Death may strike close beside you and spatter you with blood, but you feel yourself far from Death, so far that you haven't even any sense of physical repulsion. Shall I confess it? This Death who has touched so many comrades near me, so many friends—sometimes I feel an intellectual curiosity about him, as if it were some one whom I shall never meet, even, unless I stir my stumps. Is that a little perverse? Standing on the plain some day, if a bullet grazed me, it wouldn't be, I'm certain, the instinct of safety that would make me drop, but a sort of fatherly appeal from my reason, something like this: 'Come, now, you big fool; get off of that; you're going to finish by getting yourself killed!'

"Since we cannot die, why on earth do our mothers persist in being afraid of our dying?"

"Oh, Maurice," says Madame Baumer, "what fine speeches you make, and how you do get wound up!"

"—But if we do get hit, all the same, and have a second time to see how wrong we were, and how presumptuous—that does not make us the least bit sore. You take the blow, you are—surprised, and you accept the adventure because they would be only too happy—they, over there, the enemy, Fate, all the elements that knock you out—if they knew that you were groaning or raging. An immense resignation, made up of a lot of pride and a lot of humility, that is what fills the eyes of our men in moments like these: the pride of the individual whose brave soul defies blind forces, and a

sense of the futility of our poor human race, with which higher powers make their sport. Death, out there, is never tragical, madame! I still hear little Bossard under the hail of machine guns shouting: 'We're falling like flies. Mustn't stay here. Forward!' and starting to sing as he takes his first leap: '*Auprès de ma blonde*'—and falling back with a thud, jesting in a weaker voice: 'Badoum! Versailles. . . . End of the line!' "

Madame Baumer hides her eyes.

"Don't," she urges. "It's frightful!"

I repeat stubbornly:

"No, death is never tragic. That is what you must be told. Death for oneself, death for others, we accept it either way without a protest. Two days after that battle where I sang 'Schéhérazade' we had a reunion—all

shaved, and washed, and freshened up—at a bully dinner in the village hotel. And though lots of our friends were missing, we behaved like schoolboys on vacation. We teased little Jannetaz, who, at the regimental cantine, always asks for three helps of jam and drinks his tea lukewarm and weak, and four pieces of sugar in it: a sort of girl who blushes every time you speak his name above a whisper, but who, under fire, when the sergeants had all been killed off, commanded his section and led the boys way forward, when they were about ready to give it up. And big Foulon drew from his pocket a wallet of black watered silk with gold trimmings, soaked all through with sweat, and showed me, between puffs on his pipe, and with an affected indifference, photographs of a young woman, a curtain, a big lamp, the light silk of a lamp

shade, the orderly disorder of a table —all the while watching my reaction. 'Oh, Foulon, I liked those dresses, too! How I loved the ladies and their fine furniture!' It was a party that included some sublime wines that a good many of us, being youngsters, didn't appreciate very well, but drank up very well indeed. We raised our glasses to the memory of comrades fallen the day before, and even this act was a gay one. Hunger, thirst, exhaustion had given us back simple souls. We had rediscovered the antique conception of death. Three days before we had had a jolly dinner with the men who had just been killed; we had caught a glimpse of them in the marching column, above the heads of the soldiers, and then had lost them from sight again when we all deployed on the skirmish-line. And if they hadn't come back to us, that seemed to us so

simple, so necessary from the point of view of our new life, that we were not even moved by it. Our toast was like the easy hand-shake of good-by you give to some one you are glad to have seen again, but from whom you separate without regret, although you are making no new rendezvous because, you see, your life is already so full! You wave your hand, and pass on, and speak without turning: 'Good-by. I was glad to see you. But I must be off.' We recalled their last adventures. We laughed a good deal. We sketched humorous portraits of them. We did not think about their cold and bloody bodies of that day, but of their clear minds of the day before, and it was their living image that our memories laid out for burial.

"Listen. I've just remembered a detail that will show you how happy-go-

lucky we were on the morrow of that day when so many bodies fell, on the eve of such grave battles. As we were forcing ourselves a bit to empty the last bottles, Foulon, who was prowling all over the place, suddenly jumped up on the table, waving a derby hat and uttering a thousand oh's and ah's as if he had discovered the most amazing thing in the universe: 'Gentlemen, I have picked a melon!'* Oh, the reception we gave him! We fought for that hat. Foulon shoved us all back, promising every one a turn at it. It was a very decent hat. Each of us tried it on, coquettishly, and looked hard into the mirror to rediscover his old self, his physiognomy of peace times: a time five or six weeks past, but it seemed like ages. We laughed till we were out of breath at the surprises our

* In French, the derby hat is called a 'melon.'

comrades gave us under that hat, which insidiously revealed their taste, type, and character; bringing to the surface individualities lost under the uniform; re-establishing social classes. And this child's play lasted till one of us, tired of laughing, buckled on his bayonet and said: 'So long, fellows. I am going on guard as corporal, and we are the rear-guard relief; we've got something else to do besides rough-house.' "

"Yes, Maurice," says Madame Baumer, "you jest at death. You show it to us as something accepted, something gentle, something almost desirable. Are you telling us the truth? I'm by no means sure. You have such a sincere way! But the wounds, Maurice? The horror of torn and tortured flesh. . . ."

"Yes, I know. And yet, in the sta-

tions, when train-loads of the wounded go by, men exhausted from hemorrhages, fever, and travel, women go to the cars and hand up wine and fruit. They give the men pencils, too, and post-cards so that they can write and send news to their families. But often men are too weak to write and the women do it for them. Do you know what these unfortunates always, invariably, dictate—these men whose flesh is bleeding under their bandages? An address, and then: 'Everything is all right.'"

Madame Baumer listens and reflects.

"You are heroes," she says.

I pout. In talking to her I was far from all that. I was thinking about my depleted company, my comrades, my war. This word of hers jerks me back to Paris. And I sigh:

"Alas! And now you're talking like

a newspaper! For us words like 'hero' have no meaning. Yes, yes, I know, they call us 'valiant soldiers' and 'sublime blessés.' They never separate adjective and noun. It is too much like 'distinguished economist.' And, you know, we aren't heroic. Modern war demands, most of the time, that passive form of energy which is called resignation. We make, when it is asked of us, our little effort—but we don't go into any of its motives: grandeur of race, beauty of action, superlative curiosity, or supermanhood. We obey obscure laws and derive no pride therefrom because in France one is never very proud of having merely obeyed. When you march and make an advance you find it a bit stupid in folks that they should insist on translating such precise words, words that are so full of meaning, by the words 'bound' and 'gallantly

storm.' We have become simple men once more."

"Agreed, Maurice—but much too modest!"

"Not at all! The biggest boasters will tell you the same thing. You remember a big fellow, a schoolmate of Jean's, who came here two or three times, and about whom we used to tell you grotesque yarns? He was a kind of bad actor: morbidly anxious to astonish people; fake duelist, fake traveller, fake author, fake lover, fake millionaire —the make-believe hero of a thousand tall stories. He was our laughing-stock all the years we were boys together. Well, he has just been brevetted captain, at twenty-seven, on the front. He has been decorated. I have seen the text of his citation. It is bully. I've seen him since, as a matter of fact, and he didn't even mention it."

While I prattle on the sun is setting ever so benignly. Madame Baumer, silken and tenuous, grows more frail than ever in this even light. I don't see the black of her gown so distinctly, and all the life of her body is concentrated in her slim face and hands. Her eyes are deeper, larger.

"I am thinking about all that you are, whatever the names we call you by. And I am thinking of what we are, we others who are weak, we for whom you are dying in hosts, with so sure and so light a heart. Of what gold and what clay do you suppose the souls of men are moulded? People here have no appearance, even, of understanding. They are diverting themselves, they haunt the pleasure-resorts. The theatres are always crammed. If you stop to think, it is a public scandal!"

"Nonsense!" I say. "They are op-

timists. And aren't good spirits the element most necessary to endurance? Sad people are conquered in advance. If one has preserved one's good spirits, the way of showing sound health is to keep them up; if one's spirits have sunk, it's good policy to bring them back to life again."

"But, Maurice, the least sense of shame——"

"A crowd has no sense of shame. Besides, didn't you say that people didn't even seem to realize things? Madame, they *don't* realize. In Champagne there are men who have spent a year there who haven't seen what the country is like. They have never dared raise their heads above ground in the daytime. Of the plain in front of them they know only as much as they can see through the narrow mirror of a periscope. The French people see

the Great War as the soldiers see Champagne.

"Will you listen to one more reminiscence? During the September hikes, when we had been marching for days and days (we'd lost track of them!), it seemed to us as if our fatigue had gone way beyond the limits of human endurance. Of all those atrocious hours, I can only recall one night when, walking in my track like a pack-horse and after having believed a thousand times already that I had gone my limit, I fixed my eyes on a lantern hung on some wagon several yards ahead of me —as if that could drag me forward! For quite a distance I had no further sensations. That lantern filled my brain full, and held all that was left to me of consciousness. I felt sure that I should fall if that light failed me, that I should die there in the black night from physical

and moral weariness. It alone bound me to life. And all of a sudden it went out. I saw death much better in that moment than I had seen it in the heaviest bombardments. I felt it. It touched me. My recollections, my love-affairs, the world, all my interior universe, fell down the bottomless pit. But just then I saw the lantern again. A cavalryman, passing between it and me, had for a second only cut off its light. And I walked on to the halting-place.

"Since then, madame, I have heard lots of stories of the battle of the Marne. I shall read a great many more. But for me Joffre's Order of the Day, the pursuit, Von Kluck's mistake, Foch's sublime decision, the great German retreat, and the saving of Paris are only history—or legend. Of the greatest victory in the world I, who lived through

it all, saw nothing at all, and remember nothing, except the flame of a penny candle fastened by a wagoner to a rusty hook on his truck. It is like that with lots of people—good people, too—they reduce the biggest sort of events to the size of a rushlight. We mustn't lay it up against them."

"Yes, we must!" protests Madame Baumer with rising energy. "The mob is really too base! No doubt it can't understand everything. But what the women anyway know is that their sons and their husbands are dying. And meantime, Maurice, they open their doors to any one who knocks. The women have been unspeakable. . . . I ought not to have told you this."

Her voice trembles with indignation.

"Well, madame, that proves that marriage is, in many cases, only a

wholly artificial bond. But the war separates only the couples who were brought together by some silly chance. Absence is the occasion, not the cause. Perhaps it actually performs a useful and hygienic service in giving to counterfeit wives a liberty that they would have taken for themselves piecemeal. On the other hand, it has strengthened the unions which stood for something real, and reveals the true married couples as the only truly pure and truly strong ones.

"You know, perhaps, that in France it is a new fad for most ordinary people, the habit of caring for their bodies. You open your eyes at that? But it's a fact! The parvenus of cleanliness are legion, and betray themselves by the way they talk about their bathrooms promiscuously and by the scorn they take the trouble of expressing for people

who haven't got them. Now, cleanliness is costly at the front. It costs men who are all tired out the two or three mile walk it takes to find water. Sometimes it even costs the risk of getting killed on the way. And so you can easily tell which men are really fastidious, and that sort of fastidiousness is, out there, a luxury reserved to a small minority. Make no mistake, madame, true love is also a great luxury. But in this case absence and danger raise its value. How many wives or husbands, whose tenderness has been swallowed up by the monotony of their day-by-day existence, or who have been kept from expressing their love by a miserable sort of bashfulness, have been suddenly revealed to one another! Have you ever thought of the place that tenderness has taken on, this year, in letters? Of course, among

so many surprises there are some unlucky ones. They tell a story in my sector about a husband named Auguste who, in the mud of his trench, received this line from his wife: '*Dear Julien, Excuse me for sending thee only twenty francs, but I have to send ten francs to my husband, who has been surprised at not getting any remittances.*' But how many sublime letters have been scrawled, and how much unpretending beauty there has been in them! A poor peasant woman, who was using herself up by doing the hardest kind of farm-work, said to me: 'When I send a little money to my man I never ask him to write me the news, because the letter might get lost, and, as he's very stingy, I prefer not to make him miserable.' Ah, madame, what beautiful love-letters that man owes to his wife! Here, I have one here, a letter that some sol-

dier lost. Do you want me to read it to you?"

From my papers I draw out a big faded sheet. Madame Baumer makes a movement of protest.

"I picked it up at the rear. Oh, there are lots of other letters just like it! Here it is:

" 'My Jean, I'm sending you a knitted jersey, a change of underclothes, some chocolate, and a pencil. The cold weather is here. The lapwings are singing in the new meadow and in the alders. You would enjoy hearing them. Outin has written a letter to his wife, and she showed it to me after mass. He says: "So long. We shall be home to drink the new wine." François writes: "I shall be back for Christmas." And Julien du Patras says: "I'll be back to eat some pancakes." You alone, my Jean, don't say anything like that.

You only say that you are happy and that sometimes you sing. Is that the truth? I'm praying that you aren't lying to me! Tell me who are your closest friends, by whose side you sleep, and with whom you eat, whether you do little things for one another, whether they, too, get packages from home, what there is in your knapsack to make it so heavy, and whether you are still fighting. You'll say that I am mighty curious! Everything is all right here, except that the children have caught a little cold. Mary-Josephine is as tall as the table now. She helps me wash the dishes. I put Louis into trousers this week. You can imagine how pleased he is! Now I'm going to talk about myself. The potatoes are sold. I have a good lot of chickens—twenty-two pullets and a fine rooster; a regular treasure. As to our work, we've nearly

finished sowing, your mother and I. They took all our mares, ours and Uncle Peter's. But we'll manage all the same. I bring the cow in to the barn every evening and put her out in the meadow every morning. I should be glad to do some harrowing; the crop is a good one, but there is a lot of stubble in the buckwheat—in the Taillée field. I shall commence with that. I am trying to do everything I can, just as you used to. . . .'"

I stop reading. Madame Baumer is in a brown study; pensive, she softly repeats that little sentence where a wife's humble tenderness is summed up so simply: "I am trying to do everything I can, just as you used to."

"Yes," I go on, "one notices the people who are having a good time, and the other ones don't show up. Perhaps we ought to have looked for the hidden

beauty of this war, that we've hunted for in vain in the mud and the chemistry of battle-fields, down at the bottom of the postman's bag. Oh, if we could only know the whole story! How many hearts that we thought were cold have burst the envelope that was stifling all their fire!"

"Maurice," says Madame Baumer, once more serene, "take care—you're going to become confidential!"

And she raises her eyebrows, amused and a bit worried.

"Why not?" I ask. "Listen: The 3d of August, the day I left for the front, I hadn't yet bought myself the indispensable woollen socks and campaign medicine-kit—tincture of iodine, paregoric, and permanganate of potassium—that are recommended to soldiers. I went out with my father, who wanted to see something of the

streets and to get in touch with the newspapers. You remember the gossip that day about the departure of Baron von Schoen and England's attitude. I did most of the talking. You know father; always reserved, with his head full of things he keeps to himself. I was quite excited. He, calmer than usual even. We were going up the Boulevard Saint-Germain—I beating the sidewalk with my cane. At the corner of the rue du Bac father halted and said good-by. 'Now, my boy, I'm going to say good-by to you.' We were uncomfortable on that sidewalk. All the passers-by bumped into us. Father, bothered by the crowd, was very clumsy about it. He stretched out his hand—a new thing for him to do to me. All the same, I offered him my forehead, that a warm breath and a beard skimmed rather awkwardly. I took his slender hand, a

hand unknown to mine, and—how can I explain it?—I who had always been a little afraid of him, felt, this time, that it was he who was timid. His hand was so frail. It hesitated a little, and—well, it annoyed me to have noticed that. I made haste to clasp it, and then, at once, it returned the clasp. Oh, madame, I am a brute! Never, never had I realized that father loved me like that!"

Madame Baumer took my hands.

"My little Maurice! You are crying!"

I cough to pull myself together and look hard at the walls and ceiling to substitute that picture for the picture I see again so clearly: the Paris street corner where, in the thick of a moving crowd, I learned that my father loved me; and then his slender black figure, his back that was going away . . . going away. . . .

It is for me to break a silence of which I am the rather silly cause.

"Dear madame, it is very late. It is pretty, the curtain of blue sky that is slowly darkening outside your windows. . . . I must be leaving you. No, no! I don't want you to kiss me. I want to go just as I used to go, notwithstanding I have such a fine helmet. I kiss your hands. Good-by. Your tea was excellent. You want to kiss me all the same? Very well, I'll deliver this kiss to Jean. What a wretched soldier I am! A real soldier would have made you laugh, and now your eyes are wet!"

"No! You have cheered me up. You were nice. I shall have more courage now."

I feel jolly and, of a sudden, very proud of myself. I go on, weakening a little:

"My comrades would have done better than I. I wish you could hear the laughter with which they fill their shelters, their huts, and the village inns. Only yesterday, in a station lunch-room, while a lot of them were roaring together near me, I drew closer. It was a convalescent soldier who was describing his little end of some battle to a group of men on leave. What a story! I'd love to repeat it to you. But it would take another voice than mine, and that slanginess which lends old words a flavor, that accent which colors them, and that rude *leitmotiv* which gives them rhythm and quickens one's interest. This good chap was a cyclist who, last September, being the despatch-rider of his regiment, accidentally fell in with a Boche company.

"'When I saw 'em,' he said, 'I was flabbergasted. I guess you know whether

I changed my direction and put on some steam! *Piji . . . ! piji . . . !* The bees were buzzing as fast as me! I beat it 'cross country; *piji . . . !* The suckers! There were a hundred and fifty of 'em at least firing at me. I looked at the ground under my feet. I says to myself: "This is the time they get you! I see my finish!" Talk about rabbit-holes! I didn't have more'n twenty yards to do to strike a lane that was kind of sunk down below the fields. But twenty yards can seem a long ways at times! I'm getting there all right, when *bang!* I catch one in the left hip. You'd have taken it for a hit with a club. I keep on pedalling. Oh, the suckers! A worse one than the other—smack in the right hip where it cuts my sciatic. That time, hang it all! it bowls me over. I try to get up again—nothing doing! My foot just goes like this and

that. It wouldn't have anything to do with the job, that foot of mine! The suckers! I undo my knapsack and take my box of monkey-meat—you know, the reserve stores you're forbidden to touch—and then I have some meal. I've a noggin of rum I'd bought at Noisy-l'-Sec. I takes a swig. I says to myself: "Hot stuff!" That brings a big gawk of a Boche officer who seems to be snooping round everywhere. I shout: "Lookin' for the corpse? 'll right, stop lookin'; I'm the corpse." Fellows, he comes at me makin' fancy steps and tucks his gun under my nose. I says to him: "That's the stuff! that's the stuff!" "You're wounded?" sezee. "A mite, my lad!" Then he calls another Boche, who begins to cut my pants away. Boys, maybe there wasn't some blood inside! The Boche got both hands full, all right! 'n he asks me,

like that, by signs, for my bandage. I hand it over. He ties up one hip. Says I: "That's some better!" He asks me for another roll o' bandage. I only had one! He's not surprised, the chap; he takes his own! He does up my other hip. I says to myself: "Hot stuff!" Then he leans over, I catch him by the neck, and off we go. From time to time he stops because, it seems, I strangle him. You see, I had him by the neck, me, like a brother! At last he dumps me in a house where they're three, four wounded Boches who call me "Kamerad! Kamerad!" and show me photos of their kids, and ask me how many I've got. I show 'em four fingers. I might as well have made it a dozen. You're on—I want some sympathy. "Awful! Awful!" they say. Then they give me cigarettes, sausages, and cochineal. They had big boxes of

canned stuff: boxes as big as lobster-pots. I was there, just going to have a snack, when I see a French cuirassier go gallopin' past the window. I says to myself: "Things look to be brightenin' up!" And then comes another, a whale of a chap, with a sabre, who comes in and says to me: "What the deuce you doing here?" I says: "You see, I'm a prisoner." Sezee: "No more you ain't. And these chaps?" "Them, my boy," I explain, "are wounded Boches." "Boches!" he rips out. "The suckers! I can't take 'em prisoner, those bums!" He makes like he'd cut their throats! The Boches yell: "*Nicht kaput!* Don't kill us!" He, with his big stupid of a sabre, was going to make 'em go down into their cabbages again. . . . I says: "Old dear, these are brothers of mine. What's more, I dare you to touch 'em. If you feel

like killing, go kill somewhere else. Besides, these are *my* prisoners." "Good Lord," he keeps sayin' over and over, "what am I to do with 'em? What *am* I to do with 'em?" My, when he'd gone, if you'd seen my four Boches! They were crazy; they plain bawled for joy! One of 'em was shot in the foot, and he danced a jig on one leg! And right away they threw all their equipment out the window. "*Nicht war!*" they yelled. "*Nicht Parisse!*" And *hop!* went their guns—*hop!* went their clodhopper shoes; *hop! hop! hop!* "*Deutschland über alles!*" . . . We all got together again at the hospital later on.'

"I have told the story very badly, for you haven't laughed. Those who listened to the way the wounded man told it laughed fit to kill. And this yarn of the chasseurs whose unlucky game

he was—crowded, beaten, peppered—seemed to him the most ridiculous farce ever. At a near-by table a great red-faced commissariat officer, fat enough to burst, listened and rolled his big eyes. The other fellow snapped out at him: 'What ails you, old man? You've gone pale! If you keep on like that, my boy, you'll have to see a doctor!' Then, when he'd paid for his bottle of wine, 'Come, old chap, look sharp that you don't cut yourself with your fountain pen!' and went limping off. . . . That doesn't sound much like tragedy and tremolo, does it, now?"

This time Madame Baumer smiles.

"Maurice, since seeing you again I'm almost reconciled to the war."

The blue is a deeper shade than ever on the other side of the windows. But I shall never cure myself of the bad habit of going right on talking after I

have said my good-by, and making two or three partings of it.

"Madame," I say, with my hand on the door, "they used to tell me that the morals of a country suffer when, for several years running, the winters aren't cold. It seems that then there are hard times and the Chambers lack a quorum. And I had an old aunt who would say, laying down her newspaper: 'There is no such thing as reverence any more. We need a good war.' "

"Alas! Maurice. . . ."

"Come, come, madame!"

"Good-by," she repeats once more. "I hope that——"

She does not finish. And as I see that she has flushed:

"I hope so, too," I say, laughing.

And now on the staircase, where I skip half the steps, making as little

noise as possible with my thick hob-nailed boots, I hum a waltz. The street again—and just the hour I love!

I walk straight ahead, young, happy, and it is all I can do to keep from running. The daylight, evenly distributed, is as if filtered through parchment. The shop-windows glitter in it. The mirrors show gracious reflections. The eyes of passers-by have something of its limpid luminosity. The women are extraordinary.

And yet, after a few steps, I feel a sensation of flatness, a weariness of myself, that sense of emptiness which comes to one on days when one has done too much talking. The idea of seeing still more faces which will reflect my own becomes all at once quite insupportable. I ought to have accepted Fabienne's dinner invitation. Heavens, but I am lonely. After all,

though, what was the telephone invented for?

In the booth where I impatiently turn the pages of the telephone-book I have the frightful presentiment that Fabienne will not be in. I wonder why I'm looking for her number? I still remember it. I will verify, but, yes, I was right.

Madame is in. I am so blissful that I tremble. . . . Her voice is surprised at first, then delighted. "But I am delighted!" she tells me in a tone calmer than my pride could have desired. No matter! She is expecting me. We will dine alone at her apartment.

I call a taxi, which, after a little détour (for I want some cigarettes), will glide to the rue Tronchet. The light of day is taking itself away with coquetry, singing as it goes a funeral march in blue. Its luminance still rests on all

bright objects, which it picks out for a light caress. Everything has become precious. The street is as if under glass.

I find an exquisite Fabienne: happy, alert, and with her hair rearranged.

"Take off that awful helmet," she says. "You look like a fireman. You know, Mr. Change-Your-Mind, that the dinner is brought in from outside. So we'll have to take it as it comes. . . . Stay right here and be good. I'll be back in ten minutes."

I implore her:

"No, no! No surprises! Let me believe that it is all very simple—a soldier who invites himself to a pot-luck dinner. Fabienne! Fabienne! Don't go!"

But she has already gone. They bring me some newspapers. In them I find opinions and speeches, but few facts. It seems we have advanced in Cham-

pagne! Well, I shall see about that for myself, to-morrow.—Only the caricaturists seem tolerable to me. They at least know how to deal with realities. The rest of the paper doesn't even focus my attention. At the front sometimes I used to bear to my colonel, in the little grove where he was living, the three-o'clock communiqué. The colonel would rise and, in a changed voice, say to the officers who made up his four at bridge: "The communiqué, gentlemen!" He read with mock gravity in a tone by which he tried to lend to the official news an importance that his intelligence had long since failed to find in it. The others, during this reading, stopped playing cards, but not thinking about their play. I could easily enough see how their minds were wandering. Since then I've come across this same mental attitude of the front

which instinctively feels that this enormous affair is not its affair. Our officers think as we do about this. Nothing concerns them but the orders for their sector. It is not well to see the struggle from too elevated a point of view. One becomes too tiny a combatant. One no longer believes in his own rôle.

Fabienne returns, her arms full of flowers, of clusters of a fine madder-red that I used to know by name. With a deft hand she spreads them over the dining-room table. After which we sink into the cushions of two settles on each side of the chimney fire which replaces, this evening, the Boche heater.

Fabienne would like to know what I think of the Russian retreat, and whether the Rumanians really do love France. I bring her round, without much difficulty, to more feminine subjects. Some easy transitions, and now we are off on

stories of her girl friends. I listen to these thin little comedies and watch the play of them over her subtle features, to which the wisely arranged lights lend just the right effect, and which warmth and animation are commencing to unpowder. A pretty thing is a pretty woman! Her gestures follow her stories, quite as, to the peals of her laughter, responds the sparkling of the big diamond on her little white hand.

"Fabienne," I say, "play something!"

"Oh!" she exclaims, aghast. "But, my friend, we are at war! My neighbors would be shocked to pieces!"

"So much the worse for them, Fabienne. I'm hungry for some music. And play something really lively. Ah! If you can, the last movement of the Ninth Symphony. But, perhaps, you don't know it?"

"But Beethoven is German!"

"That is so. They'd have you put out, I suppose. Well, it doesn't matter. Play anything you like."

She rises, obedient, and goes to the piano. Her supple body, while she is walking, flows in the long pure lines which repeat themselves as from an inexhaustible source. She plays the famous air of Moussorgski which Litvine sang so well. An issue of *l'Illustration* lies open wide on the music-stand. Sometimes these views are sublime syntheses, and this one gives me a positive thrill. It is a line of men, all of them waiting on their knees for the moment to spring forward at the signal for the charge. Fabienne does not see them, these men. She will never see them. She is singing. She sings without art, but in a clear and correct voice whose middle register is

really beautiful. My eyes are fixed on her shadowed neck, which commences her nudeness. Ah, how can we be so silly as to reproach woman with her dormant animality? Have we not made her like that? And need we drag her into these pretentious stories of men, these heavy and tragic affairs in which it was our part to have foreseen and to have known how to escape? No! Let her preserve for our return her calm and her serene beauty. Here are a piano and flowers. . . . The table beside us is set. Daylight has not abandoned Earth. Sing, sing, my creature!

But as she reaches the last measures, and as her head turns, while her fingers, on the keys, let fall the last harmonies, I draw near and say:

"Fabienne!"

She faces round, divines, rises, hesitates. I seize her: she takes fright,

implores, grieves, weakens, and already, as I bear her off, I feel her poor thralled flesh which adores me and dedicates itself. . . .

And now we are peacefully dining, and prattling on good-naturedly. The confidences of the flesh do so simplify relations! Everything we say amuses me, and my fork seems very light in my hand. We are joking spontaneously—I already detached, like one upon the point of parting; she marvellously adaptable, like those who live only in the present.

Also the clock is racing on. Already anxious about the time, I absently pluck grapes from the bunch. I see a black vision of railroad-trains instead of the luxurious course before me. I await the end of the long story that Fabienne is telling me in a caressing voice. Ah, now!

"Good-by, Fabio!"

"Oh, so soon!" she cries, really wounded.

Her eyes are big and moist. She sighs as she offers me her narrow little head that I take in my open hands and bring to my lips as a fruit.

"Let's hope that this hideous war——"

"—— will soon be over. Yes, Fabienne."

"You'll write to me?"

"Naturally."

Her brows gather for an instant.

"It's lasted thirteen months," says she. "All the same, when one stops to think, the time has passed pretty fast."

"Ah, my dear, that," I say with fervor, "that is the jolliest thing any one has said about it yet!"

Entering the motor which waits for me below, I see her. She waves to me

from her bright window. It is true, all the same, that women have lost some of their importance!

I smile, however, in my corner to think of the young male I have just been, taking without any fuss, as in passing, this simple and merited pleasure. Alfred would approve of me.

The air enters by the open window and its freshness on my eyes already dims the pictures of a fleeting evening. During this brief motor trip, at least, I should like to devote a friendly thought to the pleasures I am leaving behind. But the stern present conflicts with such a desire.

At this hour Paris is dark as a village. I don't know very well the names of these quarters. The shaded street-lamps throw strange crêpe-like shadows on the houses as we pass them. . . . Is this la Villette, or Pantin? I do not

know—but it is gloomy here! Always, when one is a passer-by, something in one takes the impress of the place traversed. In certain avenues of Paris I become a lordling. Everything seems happy to me, and easy. In these suburbs one feels himself humble, and the weight of life crushes one down; one's heart is as heavy as a crowbar. These suburbs of the workers are big, too! It is near here that Alfred's home should be, where his wife and daughter are waiting for him. It is from one of these steep houses that he left, the same day as I, with a cheese in one pocket, a sausage in the other, a flask of rum slung to his shoulder-belt, and at the bottom of his wallet, between his union-card and his voting-card, a photograph of his wife in her Sunday best. Alfred, among the comrades that chance has given me out there, there are some

from whom I am so far that daily contact with them makes my task still heavier; there are others, like you, without whom I should, perhaps, have chucked it. To you, Alfred, I owe much, and my heart feels you to be very near! Till to-morrow, old friend!

The city gate, a long boulevard, a region I do not know. It has been raining. It is raining still, even. My vehicle stops at Bourget, at the little café where the convoys are dining. I find Bossard, who has been waiting for me. He shows me the way. From the station of Bourget-Echange, where we are, we must go to recover at Bourget-Triage the wagon Px50712, which is ours. We walk into the rails, run against signal-wires, slide on the screening that the rain has made so slippery. Bossard curses. I follow him, docile.

And it rains on the horses, on the soaked wagon-tops.

Px50712 is part of a train, the last wagon of which we enter. Tired of Bossard, tired of Bourget, I wrap myself in my rug and stretch out on the greasy floor. I make haste to put myself out of range of these lamps, these engines, this complex network of trackage, my head heavy with impressions. But even in this corner of black night I cannot pull myself together. I am all expectation and fatigue.

Long hours pass. At Châlons I must descend and join Bossard in a train full of men on leave. I seat myself next to some murmuring soldiers. A laugh in a neighboring compartment finds no echo. But a dispute that has just started up runs on, begins all over, and will never finish.

The men are talking all at the same

time. I watch them. What vigor! These peasants, these workmen, are real soldiers now. But in listening to them I divine little by little the cause of their heavy dejection, unlooked for in men I know so well, and not to be explained merely by fear of the life they are returning to and regret for what they are leaving behind. No, these men left the front with the delicious idea that they were going to cry out their distress, get rid of their stored-up complaints, and tell all about the mud, the blood, the horror, the torture. . . . But they have been petted and fêted. Paris has shown them its enthusiasm, has applauded their prowess, has recounted their legend to them. Flattered, they have, little by little, told the story that was expected of them. The heroic rôle prepared for them in advance by other people's imagina-

tions, they have played it without really taking it in. And now, in this gloomy train that is bringing them back to their misery, they realize that they have told nothing of the things they had to tell.

Again a change of cars, and we must pack ourselves in, the best we can, in a long, unlighted train, whose locomotive even has all its fires screened; then on again, slowly, till we get off at last in a pitch-dark station. There I lie down till dawn in a shadowy waiting-room, where stretched-out men are sleeping. Others are talking in a low voice. The cannon, very distant, sound faintly in the ear, but vibrate all through one's body, as when some one who is not very heavy shakes the floor overhead.

"The pigs!" growls a soldier.

And at last, after tedious hours, the regimental train carries me as far as

the bombarded village near which the trenches commence. Blue sky shines through holes in ruined walls. Thousands of birds are fluttering about, and near the canal a man, completely naked, is picking off lice. An adjutant is fishing with a line.

Now I am walking over the plain whose first undulations even have been ploughed with shells. The soil is sown with old iron. Calmly I walk in the silence, but a brand-new shell-hole, that I find in my path, gives me an unexpected uneasiness, and makes me quicken my pace. And suddenly a shell bursting on my left makes me hit it up even faster. Here are the former first lines. I progress with difficulty, tired out. Strands of detached wire stick up in the air like stumps that stir in the breeze—the agonized pulsing of a nightmare vegetation! A pine wood

opposite shows no more than skeletons of trees.

And here are the first corpses.

The Germans are ugly, earthy. The soiled green of their uniforms accentuates their lividity. A panic still to be read in their attitudes and their features has grouped them here, in piles, like clusters of the damned. Dead horses, swollen like full ulcers, stretch their rigid legs skyward, like monstrous wooden playthings. And then the little men in blue, hugging the soil with knotted hands that bespeak the despair of dying here before they reach the goal: poses of children who have flung themselves on their faces to sob their hearts out. The white spots all about are their letters, the dear trifles that never left them, and that have been scattered now by those who have gone through their pockets. For there is always

some one to take from the corpses their last few sous. They are so far away, and so poor! And, as looters are shot on sight, they are quick at their work and shamelessly discard papers, photographs, postal-cards, just where they happen to find them. So it was that, near a fallen body, in the thick of scattered papers, I picked up one day the letter which moved Madame Baumer.

At present, before these ugly sights, I recover my unfeeling heart, my deadened heart of the habitué. But, as I cross one by one all the circles of this hell which will all winter surround me, I conjure up again my trip in the opposite direction that I made one morning toward silence and cities. While, between gullies, over a ruptured and terrible soil, I see once more the inverse stages, the gendarmes, the ambulance-

cars (first humble reawakening of human pity), the fires of the kitchen-wagons—then, farther on, the first motors, the first railway-station, the first faces of women. . . . But I must make faster progress. Come, be quick! Let's run!

Panting, I throw myself flat to earth, and make myself small on the rough ground. A rumbling clatter, whose pitch rises as it passes overhead, shatters my nerves, stops my very breath. . . .

It's over. My throat relaxes. I gulp a great swallow of air, and set out again at a good clip.

Let us hope that this frightful war will soon be finished.

Ah! Paris!

Extract from the "Official Journal of the French Republic" (Orders of the Day):

Vernier, Maurice, Corporal of the ——th Regiment of Infantry. Already cited. Gravely wounded November 3, 1915, at the moment when, armed with bombs, he was leading his men to an attack on an enemy trench. Has succumbed to his wounds.

BRENTANO'S
Booksellers & Stationers
New York